

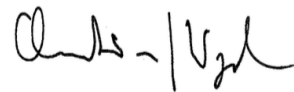
After the Wall: Cinema and the Memory of Communist Repression in the Reunified
Germany

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Introduction

As German reunification continues into its third decade, ever-fewer Germans can claim direct historical memory of life under the dictatorship that once ruled the country's east. German society's understanding of this painful segment of its past is increasingly second-hand; and the cultural work of portraying and remembering the shadowy regime of the German Democratic Republic is beginning to fall on mass media and entertainment. Film, literature, and popular culture, rather than personal memory, inform how modern Germans perceive the old regime in the east: which elements are most important and memorable, and whose stories are told. Film, by providing a direct visual rendering of the lost world of German communism, affords a crucial glimpse into modern Germany's understanding of the Stasi tyranny that once ruled much of the country. The messages, tropes, and stories told in cinema mold the image younger generations hold of the former East Germany. The cosmopolitan, diverse, and socially conscious but market-capitalist Federal Republic stands in stark contrast to the repressive and secretive Soviet-bloc regime that once stood in the east. Understanding the image modern Germans hold of the defunct Stasi state is enlightening not just for the purposes of exploring modern German society and culture, but in learning how human beings cope through art with immense oppression and terror after-the-fact.

By examining three separate pieces of film art from the post-*Wende* era, this thesis will endeavor to glean how Germany in the 21st century remembers the struggle(s) against, and perpetration of, the repressive regime of the former East Germany. As with any artistic work, the particulars of various films about the

subject will differ with the director—but the presence of overarching, common themes in the post-reunification cinema of East Germany helps reveal modern German understandings of the country's Cold War past. How and why were individuals targeted by state violence? How did individuals survive and resist tyrant? How is guilt assigned for the regime's crimes against its targets? The issue of complicity—the overlap between victim and perpetrator, and the grey area surrounding those who were both tacitly involved in state repression but also victimized thereby—is another key element of post-reunification GDR cinema. In such an authoritarian and conformist society, some individuals inevitably were caught in the regime's crosshairs. What forms of resistance did they undertake, and how did they persevere in the face of sometimes crushing oppression?

Several more prominent recent films have been selected to offer a broad view of issues pertaining to repression and society in East Germany. *Barbara* is a story of individual struggle and perseverance against smothering oppression; how those ensnared and trapped by the tentacular state could find ways to make their lives better and more fulfilling in the face of adversity and oppression. *Barbara* shows the everyday trials and hardships faced by those targeted and singled out by authorities, and how such persons navigated and circumvented oppression.

Conversely, *Das Leben der Anderen*, while spotlighting how dissenters and non-conformists struck out against tyranny, also explores state agents and enforcers themselves: their motivations, personalities and backgrounds. *Barbara* and *Das Leben der Anderen* introduce modern Germans to both sides of the shadowy, feared apparatus that most never directly experienced; indeed, *Barbara* was a direct

response to *Das Leben der Anderen*. Ultimately, the state and its enforcement arm were not a faceless, grey monolith; but a collective of real people; fallible human beings with beliefs, desires, and biases who chose to act in the name of authority either out of conviction or more nefarious personal ends.

Zwei Leben, the third film, is linked to *Das Leben der Anderen*, as it also deals with questions of culpability and the underlying psychology and motivations that drove state actors to behave as they did. Unlike the other two films, which portray tyranny while it was ongoing, *Zwei Leben* examines the lingering trauma of oppression after-the-fact: the mixed feelings of shock and euphoria that accompanied the fall of the regime, the horror of many East Germans who learned of their family's complicity in surveillance, and the forgotten victims of state violence who were erased by history.

The historical experience of the millions of people who lived in the former East Germany can never be fully encapsulated by any one film, but cinema offers a vital window into the popular memory of East German communism and the Stasi state.

Chapter 1: *Barbara*

Summary and Introduction

Barbara, directed by Christian Petzold, takes place in 1980 East Germany and follows several weeks in the life of a doctor—Barbara (Nina Hoss), the film’s namesake—who has been transferred to a remote rural hospital as a punishment for submitting an application to leave the country. Having previously worked in the elite and prestigious Charité hospital in Berlin, Barbara plans to illegally flee the country with the help of a smuggler to live with her lover, Jörg (Mark Waschke) in West Germany.

Barbara must clandestinely plan her escape by meeting with liaisons who give her money and relay messages from her lover, all while being watched and terrorized by Schütz (Rainer Bock), an agent of the *Staatssicherheit* secret police, who organizes surprise raids on her apartment and surveils her through a network of informants. Barbara begins to develop a friendship that adopts romantic overtones with her fellow doctor and work overseer Dr. André Reiser (Ronald Zehrfeld), who is known to have been blackmailed into being a Stasi informant, but whose true loyalty is unclear. During her assignment to the clinic, Barbara meets several teenaged youth whose lives have been shattered by the regime’s ruthless quest for conformity. One of these, Stella (Jasna Fritzi Bauer), is a pregnant young girl and an internee of the brutal youth work camp Torgau, who looks to Barbara for help and solace.

In the process of preparing for her escape, Barbara realizes that living in the West may mean giving up her work and independence for a domestic life as a

housewife, and thus also her ability to help other victims of the communist dictatorship. On the night of her planned escape, Stella unexpectedly arrives at Barbara's apartment, having made an escape from Torgau. She and Barbara head to the sea to rendezvous with the smuggler, where Barbara heroically sacrifices her place on the smuggler's watercraft to allow Stella to take her place.

A somber yet inspiring film, themes of isolation, resilience, state violence, torn loyalty, and moments of key decision are heavy throughout the work. At the film's outset, Barbara wants only to flee the country to unite with her lover—but in her capacity as a doctor in the rural ward, she sees a chance for fulfillment in caring for her young patients. Petzold skillfully crafts a compelling storyline for the film, exploring both personal and societal issues in East Germany, ranging from the historical experience of the 1980s to comparing Eastern and Western gender relations and the Soviet bloc's dearth of consumer goods.

Through artful cinematography and the exploration of an array of deep and pertinent themes, Petzold explores how disloyal residents of the former East Germany navigated a hostile state and society, revealing the internal conflicts and difficult choices they often faced.

Petzold as a Director

Petzold as a director offers a rather fitting biographical vantage point for the portrayal of East German society. Petzold visited the DDR during family trips to see relatives, and in his work on the topic he somewhat muddies the traditional Cold War dichotomy between the promising, individualistic West and the drab, repressive Eastern bloc into a more ambiguous tension between outside repression

and personal autonomy and choice. This is seen in Barbara's case as she is pulled between her desire for freedom from state repression offered by the West and her attachment to her work and independence in the East.

In two interviews Petzold gave on planning and shooting *Barbara*, Petzold discusses his goals and motivations in crafting the film. Clear parallels exist between *Barbara* and Petzold's other works, such as *Yella*, which often feature persecuted characters and an otherworldly, ghostly air (Fisher, 139). Petzold is clearly no hardline anti-communist Cold Warrior hoping to blacken the memory of East Germany. Although he certainly does not defend the harsh ideology of the East, he avoids wholesale condemnation of all aspects the former Democratic Republic. Indeed, Petzold admits that he considered himself a communist when he was at film school in 1980s West Berlin—although he admits this was “mainly to provoke [his] parents” (Fisher, 153).

In Petzold's interview with Jaimey Fisher, he postures *Barbara* as a response to what he sees as the largely grey and gloomy depiction of East Germany in the blockbuster hit *Das Leben der Anderen*. Per Petzold, he wanted to portray an “East Germany that had colors”¹ (Fisher, 140). In some ways, this more neutral stance offered by *Barbara*'s director, who saw the inner workings of the Democratic Republic firsthand, offers a particularly enlightening view of both East German society and the place of dissidence therein. By avoiding clichés and tropes about East German life and the Cold War, Petzold can more accurately depict the real experience of those like Barbara who suffered under state repression. Even in this

¹ “Ich wollte, dass die DDR Farben hat.”

more evenhanded presentation of the Cold War, the brutality and ruthlessness of the SED regime is nonetheless wholly damning.

Petzold's favored cinematic tools, discussed briefly in both interviews, include the use of sound—such as long periods of relative quiet without dialogue—and both environmental and non-diegetic auditory cues like the cawing of crows or clacking of a typewriter. Solitude, too, is a frequent motif, as Barbara is almost always shown either in isolation or in the presence of only a few other people. The lack of music and emphasis on environmental noise in his films is part of an effort to focus on sensual stimulus: per Petzold “[i]t’s important that we get back to hearing the world again” (Ratner, 20). Meaningful and clear symbolism, reinforced by subtle background effects, characterizes Petzold’s cinematography.

Environmental cues and stimuli, a pervading sense of tension and apprehension, and the relative seclusion faced by Barbara convey the film a gloss of almost ghostly eeriness. A certain sense of frustration arises in the viewer, as the film spends a great deal of time showing Barbara in her personal life, but never directly reveals great detail about her internal thoughts and motivations. In this backdrop, the viewer is able to view Barbara’s internal conflicts as if through a veil—observing them, but never quite understanding them discretely.

Numerous small, aesthetic symbolic choices are also apparent in the film. The protagonist’s very name—“Barbara Wolf”—is doubly emblematic of rugged individualism. The German name “Barbara” derives from *Barbaren*; barbarians—the quintessential outsiders who are anathema to the established society. Wolves, too, have classically symbolized cunning and independence, which Barbara embodies

through her strong will and her machinations to escape the country, defy Schütz, and aid Stella.

Scene Analysis



Figure 1: 00:02:09: The viewer's first impression of Barbara shows her to be scornful and tense

From the beginning, Petzold brings Barbara's more everyday forms of defiance—her blunt, direct personality, and her refusal to placate her overseers with pleasant interaction—into central focus. This motif begins in the very first scene of

the film. The aerial, far-removed angle of the camera shot in the opening segment gives the clip a sense of clandestineness and unwelcome observation.

As the first scene unfolds, no time is wasted in quickly introducing the film's key figures of Barbara, Schütz, and André. The scene shows Barbara smoking on the park bench, overlooked by André—her work supervisor—and Schütz, the Stasi agent assigned to oversee her. The viewer immediately senses that the two men somehow hold authority over Barbara, given the fact that they are watching her through the window from above, and also that Barbara strongly resents the situation she is in. Barbara is aware she is being watched, given her furtive, darting eyes, yet obstinately smokes a cigarette, showing up at the latest possible moment to her first day at a new work placement. For the viewer first encountering Barbara, her demeanor appears curt, insolent, and even spiteful as she stiffly whips around

her cigarette and glances contemptuously at the upstairs window where the two men are standing. Her body language and gesticulations are clearly hostile and defiant, as she uses both abrupt, standoffish motions and unwelcoming, closed mannerisms like folded arms and legs while lighting and smoking her cigarette—something she knows that Schütz sees. These small acts of contempt are tools Barbara uses in lieu of more direct means to frustrate her captors.

Though the camera angle is positioned above and away from Barbara, her subtle movements—like the sound of gravel under her step, or the sound of fabric rustling as she crosses her legs—are clearly audible, and are much louder in the film even from far away than they would have been closeby in reality. As the scene transitions, the clacking of a typewriter plays unexplained in the background, though none is visible in the scene, evoking the typing of Barbara's Stasi profile or *Akte*—a poignant subliminal reference to the meticulous recordkeeping of the Stasi. Each subtle but exaggerated sensory stimulus further establishes the all-encompassing and uncomfortable surveillance that will define the whole film.

Schütz is immediately portrayed as a shadowy and cunning character. He is first positioned slouching near the back of the



Figure 2: 00:02:04: A compassionate Andre and a sinister Schütz overlook Barbara

room in which he and André are watching Barbara; and he stands behind André

looking over his shoulder, conveying a sense of eery omnipresence. He is wearing entirely black attire, and knows Barbara's character well enough to answer André's

questions about her—despite the two never having been seen together yet in the film, implying that he is well aware of the details of her dossier.

André, with his soft tone of voice and gentle half-smile, appears sympathetic but otherwise opaque as a character. He, like Barbara, is smoking a cigarette, establishing a small but noteworthy connection between the two. It is not immediately clear whether he is merely being informed about Barbara's new placement in his work unit by Schütz, or if André works more regularly with him to surveil certain workers. Schütz is presented with a strong air of cold, arrogant officialdom, as he smears Barbara as "pouty"; and when asked by André about Barbara's personal life—and whether she lives alone—Schütz responds clinically and matter-of-factly that "[Barbara's] incarceration caused her circle of friends to disintegrate". André's semblance of being torn between his official duty to Schütz and sympathy for Barbara will be central to both André's character and his relationship with Barbara.

Petzold's quick and substantive introduction of three of the most prominent characters in the film sets the pace for much of the rest of the plot, such as the ambiguous relationship between Reiser and Barbara and the constant hostility, both direct and subtle, between Barbara and Schütz—and the state he represents.

Underpinning the entire film is the ruthless and omnipresent state repression visited upon disloyal elements like Barbara. In her case, this repression is manifested as random apartment raids, professional blackmail, being spied upon by neighbors, and general opprobrium. The most vivid and lengthiest depictions of regime violence occur in two scenes in which Barbara's apartment is searched,

showing the invasive surveillance that “white collar” citizens suspected of disloyalty faced.



Figure 3: 00:11:36 After two Volkspolizisten strongarm Stella into the clinic, Barbara diffuses the situation.

The other principle victim of direct state repression in the film was Stella. The violence faced by Stella is even starker and crueller than that faced by Barbara, although it is only shown briefly. Stella’s suffering was more physical and directly

violent; as an uneducated young girl, the regime saw her as less valuable than the physician Barbara. While Stella is first brought into the ward for treatment, she is manhandled and cajoled by two grown policemen and forced down upon a table for examination—who only let go at Barbara’s behest. This marks the beginning of Barbara’s protective role over the girl, a dynamic that Petzold describes in his interview with Ratner as “companionable” and “a rebirth [for Barbara]”, but he goes on to insist that rather than Barbara representing a parental figure to the orphaned Stella, the two “make a kind of unspoken pact, but it’s no mother-daughter pact” (Ratner, 6).

One brief segment shows the unforgiving and Spartan work conditions faced by Stella and other youth at Torgau as they dredge a bog with pitchforks, watched by armed



Figure 4: Screen at 01:08:12: A desperate Stella frantically flees Torgau, having just barely escaped

guards and attack dogs. This scene serves largely to show the extremes of the

socialist regime's cruelty: although the situation faced by Barbara was oppressive and nerve-wracking, the authorities sometimes were much harsher. In the scene at Torgau clearing the swamp, two Russian pilots performing a parachuting exercise provide Stella a chance to run as the guards are distracted by the display—seizing the moment, she darts off into the woods. Within seconds, the piercing sound of alarm whistles and German shepherds barking disrupts the quietness of Stella's footsteps through the woods, but the girl manages to escape under the camp's tall border fence lined with barbed wire (although not without injury). The final seconds of the segment, showing Stella in her work uniform running into an open field, having just cleared the work camp's perimeter, is a powerful image, showcasing the free spirit of dissenters who refused to be crushed even under dire circumstance.

Twice throughout the film, Barbara's apartment is searched by Stasi agents while she is present, evoking the literally intimate nature of communist repression. These moments signify the extreme lengths to which the communist authorities would go to snuff out the smallest chance of resistance or dissidence, or in Barbara's case, any clue about plans to leave the country. The first search was motivated by Barbara being discovered biking alone at night, a seemingly innocuous activity that was enough to earn retaliation for anyone like Barbara under suspicion by the authorities.

The short, successive scenes in this segment of the first raid provide an encapsulation of the cat-and-mouse game experienced by active dissidents of the regime. The sequence begins with Barbara going to a comically mismanaged and

deserted government restaurant, where she meets with a waiter in the lavatory (which the viewer infers has been prearranged), who gives her a sealed message and some Deutschmarks. The segment cuts to Barbara traveling on a trolley, where she reads the message (detailing where to hide the money in the envelope), and she must discard it immediately by ripping it up and throwing it out of the window: the camera repeatedly cuts to briefly show a group of unknown men sitting in the trolley, underscoring the anxiety created by the constant fear of being discovered while undertaking any kind of questionable activity. As dusk approaches, Barbara bikes to a large crucifix near the coast (the viewer can hear the sea and wind) to deposit the money for purposes not immediately clear to the viewer. As she does so, the wind blows turbulently in the background, knocking over Barbara's bike, a clear environmental indicator foreshadowing the troubles to come.

As Barbara bikes home in the night, she is stopped by Schütz, who is driving a car. He abruptly and aggressively accelerates and brakes just in front of Barbara's bicycle, causing her to almost crash. The segment cuts to Barbara's apartment,



Figure 5: Screen at 00:09:33: The foreboding and anonymous Stasi beckon Barbara to force her to undergo a bodily search

where Schütz has summoned his Stasi coworkers to thoroughly search Barbara's dwelling, belongings and also her person. Barbara stands by the door as a gloved, anonymous man ruffles through the pockets of the clothes in her closet. A female agent

arrives, heralded by the sound of a shrill doorbell that breaks the scene's

uncomfortable silence, to conduct a strip search. The Stasi woman is shown tersely and forcefully putting on rubber gloves, uttering only “*Kommen Sie, bitte*” (“Come this way, please”).

Throughout the scene, sounds from the environment—the crumpling of paper, the chirping of crickets—are significantly louder than typical, creating a fragile and anxious suspense that is abruptly interrupted by the intrusion of Schütz. The eerie silence and general lack of dialogue in the scenes helps establish the semblance of inhumanity and cruelty experienced by Barbara. The segment ends with a brief scene of Barbara clutching herself in bed the next morning, jittering and

tightly grasping a cigarette, clearly deeply jarred and disturbed by the episode.



Figure 6: Screen at 00:19:46: The next morning, Barbara is clearly jarred from the experience

The violation of the home by government agents is purposely distressing and uncomfortable for the viewer. Nothing (and no one) in

society was sacred or safe from state scrutiny—not even personal effects, private living spaces, or the body, including the most intimate areas. Toward the end of the film, immediately after Stella escapes from Torgau, the authorities again arrive unexpectedly at Barbara’s apartment to conduct another search. This moment once again captures Petzold’s use of sound, as the ominous and exaggerated cry of a crow pierces the otherwise quiet scene just before the Stasi arrive. The second search scene pushes its depiction of the invasiveness of the Stasi’s method’s further,

showing the gruff and relentless way that state officials demanded total compliance



Figure 7: Screen at 1.09.46: Petzold's depiction of the literally intimate surveillance is purposely intensely uncomfortable

from their targets. The scene cuts to Barbara's bathroom, where she is forced to undergo a strip search. The female Stasi assistant (the same as in the first search scene) barks unsettling orders such as "*Hair down!*" and "*Bend forward—*

legs apart!" This was after Barbara pled to not have to undergo such a violating procedure again, to no avail.

Complicating Barbara's motives as the plot develops is her evolving relationship with Jörg and the future she expects after escaping the country. Barbara's relationship with Jörg is ultimately not thoroughly explored in the film, even though it is the initial source of conflict by leading Barbara to file an emigration application. Their relationship is left relatively undetailed and juxtaposed against more pressing elements of the plot, like Barbara's sense of duty in the clinic and strong sense of personal autonomy. The two are ultimately only shown together twice—once in a secret conjugal meeting in the woods, and once in a hotel for foreigners—and have relatively short conversation.

One of Barbara's clandestine visits with her lover at the Interhotel is ultimately a turning point in the outcome



Figure 8: Screen at 1:02:01: Barbara realizes her relationship with Jörg is not as ideal as she had presumed

of the film, inducing Barbara to remain behind in the East. One night, Barbara ventures to Interhotel, the East German hotel meant for foreigners staying in the country, to rendezvous with Jörg, who is ostensibly in the country to conduct business. The scene is telling of potential problems in the two's relationship and Barbara's conception of her life in the West.

As Barbara climbs through the window to Jörg's room and the two begin to become intimate, they overhear moaning from the next room over. Jörg whispers

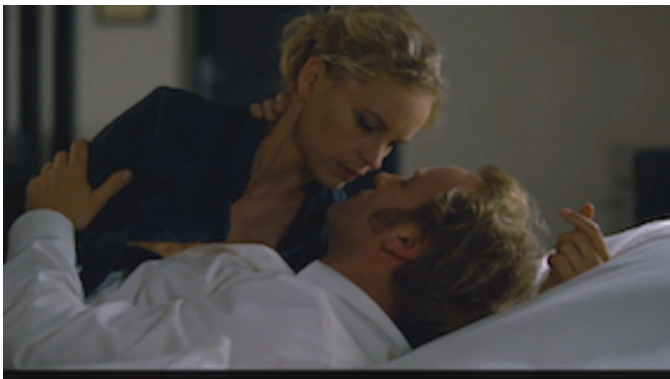


Figure 9: Screen at 00:59:53: Barbara becomes cold as she realizes she and Jörg have differing views of their future

cheekily that "Gerd [his business partner] met a girl," to which Barbara replies "She wants to get to the West."² Although it is clear Barbara does want to leave the country and be with her lover, a decisive moment occurs when

Jörg is about to leave the room to meet with his business partner and he informs her that she can soon sleep in every day; she will not have to work—he earns enough money as a businessman for them both. Given the strong sense of independence and proud sense of individualism Barbara displays throughout the film, her silent and sterile response—she turns stiff and stares at him coldly—shows that although she hates life in East Germany, her work as a physician is central to her sense of fulfillment.

² Jörg: *Gerd hat ein Mädchen kennengelernt*. Barbara: *Sie will im Westen*.

This facet of Barbara and Jörg's relationship is a reflection of Petzold's criticisms of the West: While Petzold emphasizes that the East certainly was far more politically repressive, Petzold reserves some rebuke for the culture of West Germany, criticizing its relatively less egalitarian gender roles. Ratner's own short analysis of the film includes a keen insight; namely that although the East is generally portrayed as dismal and miserable, and the West as free and appealing, the East German man André represents the better angels of East German society, whereas the West German man Jörg in some respects represents the flaws of the West: "André values [Barbara's] work; Jörg does not. Petzold shows the couple awkwardly lying down fully clothed or Barbara perched girlishly on Jörg's lap, wordlessly emphasizing the housewifey role that probably awaits" (Ratner, 2).

While the two lie together, Jörg mentions the possibility of his moving to East Germany, which generates a visceral reaction from Barbara—she tells him curtly and disgustedly "You're insane;" that "One can't be happy in this country."³ Here the sense for Barbara of being trapped between her obligation as a doctor and her contempt for the regime becomes particularly apparent, culminating when it becomes clear that fleeing the country may mean that she will be pressured to adopt a domestic role as a housewife. Indeed, when Jörg tells her the exact time and date planned for the escape, her response is "Ah, I'm scheduled for work then!"⁴

This scene in the hotel room is the only in which background music is playing: a slow, intoxicating, and flirtatious elevator tune lulls in the background, which Jörg abruptly turns off as he sits down on the bed to discuss the future with

³ *"Du spinnst. Man kann nicht in diesem Land glücklich werden."*

⁴ *"Dann hab' ich Dienst!"*

Barbara. Like the sudden end of the intoxicating tune, the reality revealed by Jörg and Barbara's conversation was, at least partially, the end of the dream that Barbara had imagined for herself in the West.



Figure 10: Screen at 1:04:15: The shrewd and calculating Barbara contrasts strongly with the young dreamer Steffi

In the segment after which Jörg leaves the hotel room to attend a meeting, a young and attractive woman, Steffi (Susanne Bormann), slips into Barbara's room. She and Barbara begin to have a conversation. It is strongly implied that Steffi is a prostitute, but she says that her client has told her that he loves her, and wants to buy her a ring and bring her to the West. Steffi shows Barbara a ring catalogue filled with images of engagement rings, but Barbara is largely silent: Steffi seems to have changed how she views her own relationship with Jörg, as it seems as if his motive may just be to find a housewife. Petzold touched on this topic in his interview with Ratner: "Jörg is a little like Captain Smith with Pocahontas; he comes into a country and gets himself a woman. These men saw themselves as a hero, an agent, and a fantastic man, [m]any went to the GDR for a romance they could end any time [with] the built-in excuse that they just wouldn't come back or she couldn't come over" (19).

Conclusion

Exploring the daily challenges of dissidents (such as house raids and being unsure of who was an informant), means of resistance (caring for the downtrodden and refusing to be psychologically broken), and societal themes (economic

problems, gender norms), *Barbara* crafts a surprisingly broad and informative representation of life in the East in its relatively short 105 minute runtime. *Barbara* is largely the inverse of the next film to be examined in this analysis—*Das Leben der Anderen*. While Barbara initially despises the East and yearns to leave, she ultimately comes to accept her role as doctor as a means to personal independence and a way to provide a shimmer of hope to others suffering under the yoke of communist tyranny. In *Das Leben der Anderen*, the roles and trajectories of the central characters are inverted. Rather than a dissident learning to find solace by helping other targets of the regime, a once zealous Stasi captain becomes increasingly disillusioned with the system he once supported, and begins to use his role to actively undermine the surveillance state.

Chapter 2: *Das Leben der Anderen*

Summary and Introduction

Florian Donnersmarck's 2006 *Das Leben der Anderen*, the next film of this analysis, both contrasts and dovetails cleanly with *Barbara*, examining many of the same historical realities, but often through the lens of the socialist state, vis-à-vis its enforcers, rather than through its subjects and victims. While *Barbara* was a lesser known (but nonetheless critically acclaimed) work, *Das Leben der Anderen* (2007), directed by Florian von Donnersmarck, is among—if not the single most—prominent film in the reunification era concerning the Stasi surveillance state. Von Donnersmarck's blockbuster embodies the modern German conception of the surveillance state: ruthless, omnipresent and unforgiving, yet riddled with corruption and intrigue.

Das Leben der Anderen is, like *Barbara*, set in the final decade before the Wende, the 1980s (with a concluding scene in the early 1990s, shortly after reunification)—but in urban East Berlin, rather than the sleepy East German province. At the outset of the film, Gerhard Wiesler (Ulrich Mühe)—a hardened, doctrinaire captain in the communist secret police force, the *Staatssicherheit*—encourages his superiors to open an investigation against Dreyman, a seemingly loyal playwright who arouses Wiesler's instinctive suspicions. The communist minister for culture, Hempf (Thomas Thieme), acquiesces, but for ulterior reasons: The minister hopes to blackmail Christa-Maria Sieland (Martina Gedeck), an illustrious actress and Dreyman's lover, into having an affair with him, ultimately raping her repeatedly, threatening to forbid her from performing should she resist.

(Sieland's painkiller addiction leaves her liable to professional blackmail.) The Stasi install a full surveillance system in Dreyman's apartment, manned by Wiesler, who becomes intimately ensnared in the details of Dreyman's private life.

Wiesler becomes increasingly disillusioned as he learns of his superiors' corrupt motivations for Dreyman's surveillance. When Dreyman's friend and fellow author, Albert Jerska (Volkmar Kleinert), commits suicide after being forbidden from writing due to his nonconformity, Dreyman anonymously pens a sensational exposé in the West German magazine *Spiegel* about suicide in the German Democratic Republic. Wiesler, disgusted with the ruthlessness and corruption of the repressive system he had supported, decides to falsify his reports and creates an alibi for Dreyman at great personal risk. Eventually, Hempf and Grubitz (Wiesler's Stasi superior, played by Ulrich Tukur) begin to suspect Dreyman of their own accord—and increase their pressure on Christa-Maria, threatening her with a lifetime ban on performing should she not comply and betray Dreyman. Cracking under pressure, she reveals the location of the smuggled typewriter Dreyman used to write his exposé, and the Stasi raid Dreyman's apartment—but not before Wiesler had managed to remove it from its hiding place. Sieland, dismayed at her actions, runs into the street and commits suicide by jumping in front of a car. Grubitz cannot prove Wiesler's complicity in shielding Dreyman, but the former captain is condemned to a lowly paper-pushing job opening mail envelopes in the ministry basement until the collapse of communism some years later.

At the film's end after the fall of the regime, Dreyman (who was never aware of his surveillance while it was ongoing) discovers while perusing his Stasi files that

Wiesler had extensively fabricated his official Stasi reports in order to protect him—though Dreyman knows Wiesler only by his Stasi anonym used in the documents. He dedicates a novel in gratitude to the mysterious agent.

Stylistic, Thematic, and Character Analysis

Like *Barbara*, Donnersmarck examines two themes central to the post-Wende cinema of East Germany: the issue of complicity; the blurred distinction between victims and perpetrators within the communist state; and the forms that individual perseverance, resistance, and reawakening took in the face of suffocating oppression and tyranny. While the two films have considerable thematic overlap, the presentation and style of the two diverge radically. *Barbara's* more individualized, ad hoc, “believable” narrative of individual suffering under the SED regime contrasts with the more Hollywood approach of Donnersmarck, who offers a broader view of East German society than is seen in *Barbara*, but employs and exaggerates common tropes about the East. By presenting a Stasi agent who had second thoughts, Donnersmarck stretches the limits of realism to both portray different echelons of the surveillance state while leaving room for questions of morality—how even former evildoers, like a Stasi captain, can come to be redeemed in their humanity.

Contrasted with *Das Leben der Anderen*, *Barbara's* presentation of Stasi members was far more condemning and unambiguous—there was no change of heart; no human dualism—just unflinching, doctrinaire enforcers and their targets. The only human dimensions of Stasi terror were embodied in the wavering André, and a brief scene depicting the suffering of the Stasi man Schütz's terminally ill wife.

This representation of the capacity for remorse in state repressors by von Donnersmarck has become iconic to the film, and its largest singular source of controversy and criticism. Donnersmarck does not mollify the ruthless corruption and exploitation committed by some powerful Stasi officials—but he leaves open the idea that even in such individuals, hope for redemption still remains, vis-à-vis Wiesler’s evolution.

While Petzold criticized Donnersmarck for his sometimes hackneyed portrayal of the Democratic Republic as a universally miserable dystopia devoid of all happiness, others have singled out his portrayal of the Stasi apparatus as somewhat misleading or ahistorical. Germanist Mary Beth Stein writes “von Donnersmarck’s GDR is populated almost exclusively with Stasi perpetrators and victims ... Estimates suggest that approximately one to two percent spied on another one to two percent of the population The repressive nature of the SED regime is overdrawn, not so much by the exaggeration of the methods of the MfS ... but by the exclusion of East Germans who neither supported nor resisted the regime” (Stein, 569). Certainly, the SED regime was capable of ruthless methods and tyranny, but the situation shown in the film was not typical of everyday society.

Perhaps the most inaccurate element of the plot was the plausibility of Wiesler’s sudden conversion after decades of service: “[T]here has been no evidence in the 185 km of *Stasi* files .. that there was ever an officer who concealed evidence to help a dissident as Wiesler does in this film” (Dueck, 600). Joachim Gauck, who formerly headed the management of the old *Ministerium* archives after reunification, underscored the unlikelihood of such a conversion, while defending the overall

depiction of Stasi tactics and organization as largely true to reality (Gauck, “Ja, so war es!”)⁵.

Das Leben der Anderen also diverges with *Petzold* in its more systemic portrayal of state repression. While *Barbara* focuses upon the everyday effects and travails of Stasi oppression upon the life of one individual, *Das Leben der Anderen* offers a more comprehensive view of how the surveillance state functioned as a system, both for its participants and subjects. Viewers are introduced to every echelon of the communist state’s elaborate repression apparatus, from the film’s opening scene in a classroom for new Stasi recruits, to the sinister motivations of top officials; the savvy strategies used by state targets to avoid detection, and the secretive technical means used in state surveillance. Von Donnersmarck also explores the world of artists and writers in the German Democratic Republic, and how dissenting artists were often suffocated by crushing censure and punishment for deviating from the state’s proscribed limits on their expression.

The forms of resistance against the state authorities portrayed in *Das Leben* are also more concrete and political in comparison to those featured in *Barbara*—while Barbara is motivated by a simple desire to be left alone and make her own choices, Dreyman is moved to sedition because of his anger at censorship and the curtailment of artistic freedom, and the regime’s cover-ups of the country’s suicide epidemic. Repercussions for deviance are similar: Career blackmail, like Barbara’s

⁵ “Einige meiner Freunde werden den Film deshalb nicht mögen, werden sagen, ein solcher Stasi-Offizier sei ihnen nicht bekannt. Das mag wohl so sein. Aber ein Spielfilm ist keine zeitgeschichtliche Dokumentation, er kann freier mit der Geschichte umgehen.”

forced transfer to a drab countryside clinic, is again a prominent plot element, in the vein of Jerska's suicide and the blackmailing of Christa-Maria-Sieland's.

Von Donnersmarck, unlike Petzold, provides a more complete view of the motivations and machinations of both perpetrator and victim of state repression, emphasizing how the tentacular Stasi meticulously infiltrated every aspect of its targets' lives—physically, professionally, and personally. An entire quasi-industry developed around maintaining files about every pertinent detail of citizens' lives, stored in large-scale government record offices, shown briefly in a clip of gigantic sorting machines in the Stasi headquarters. Cameras and auditory wires were clandestinely installed to monitor living quarters and possible meeting areas, and telephone calls and written communication were often intercepted. Dreyman's own neighbor was warned of dire consequences should she let slip that her neighbor was under suspicion. More relevant to the film's plot than the actual means of surveillance was the motivations for it in Dreyman's particular case: the twisted desire of an official to rape and coerce sex from a subordinate, and to prevent the outside world's knowledge of the fact that conditions in the country were so dire that many citizens were driven to suicide.

As it concerns the two main protagonists, Barbara and Wiesler could to some extent be considered one another's foil; yet both parallel one another in intriguing ways. Both sacrifice the futures they had planned for themselves to protect others, as Barbara allows Stella to escape in her place, and Wiesler torpedoes his own career to protect Dreyman. Indeed, the parallels can broadly be understood as intentional, considering that the director of *Barbara*, Christian Petzold, positioned

his film as a response to Donnersmarck's blockbuster. Barbara was considered a disloyal element by her own state, yet also someone who came to accept living in a dreary and hostile society through the fulfillment she gained by assisting others; Wiesler was a ruthless enforcer for the state who came to sabotage the very system he had once supported when exposed to its true face. Their trajectories are each other's inverse.

While some of the most poignant moments in *Barbara* feature characters as victims of state violence and repression, some of the most memorable scenes in *Das Leben der Anderen* reverse this paradigm, showing the machinations of those who perpetrate state repression: the bugging of an apartment; the intimidation and silencing of Dreyman's neighbor who is aware of his surveillance; government agents gathered in offices, discussing which psychological profile their targets fit so as to better destroy them; the ruthless threats and torture visited upon suspects in drab interrogation rooms. The two films taken together provide a fairly comprehensive overview of both the methodology and the human costs of the socialist regime's enforcement and surveillance arm in the former East Germany.

Just as *Das Leben der Anderen* offers a fuller view of the surveillance state, the film offers a more complete and legible view into its protagonists' motives and psyches than does *Barbara*. Wiesler's transformation, the central theme of the film, is displayed as somewhat punctuated; ushered in by distinct moments in the plot. In a general sense, Wiesler's conversion might be interpreted as a condemnation of communism as shown from within—a society promising equality and progress

revealed to grant only the opposite, corrupted by greedy elites who abused their power.

Stylistically, the tempo of von Donnersmarck's work is far faster and fuller than Petzold's. Von Donnersmarck eschews *Barbara's* long periods of calm and solitude for a more hectic, fuller plotline with far more dialogue. The causal chain of events that drive Wiesler's actions is clearly portrayed, as are his internal feelings; and *Das Leben der Anderen's* 2 hour, 18 minute running time is over a half hour longer than the 1 hour, 45 minute *Barbara*. Von Donnersmarck also employs music and sound far more traditionally than does Petzold, frequently inserting emotionally wrenching background scores to intensify the film's mood.

Also noteworthy is the unyieldingly gloomy, austere presentation of East Berlin as a gray morass of chipped concrete and urban decay. The film is noticeably devoid of color, with backgrounds swathed in gray and brown, and characters are usually shown as frumpily dressed. Little greenery or nature is seen in the film, in stark contrast to the verdant settings seen in *Barbara*—drably decorated apartments, Spartan offices, and decaying concrete streets and buildings are the primary setting of Donnersmarck's picture. True to history, the consumer goods shown like automobiles and televisions were shown as subpar, retrograde and scarce.

Scene Analysis

At the film's beginning, the cruelty of both Wiesler personally and the East German state seem at their peak, occurring before Wiesler's internal revolution and before the unrest that ultimately toppled the communist dictatorship. The film's

opening scene features Wiesler using a previously recorded interrogation as an instruction tool for a new class of Stasi inductees. Wiesler is shown grilling the man he is interrogating about having helped an acquaintance flee to the West—and though the man initially resists, he finally cracks under pressure after hours of sleep deprivation and when his family is threatened with arrest and separation. With no regard for the man’s wellbeing, Wiesler is, in that moment, the essence of the cold, unwavering communist state. Wiesler coldly remarks that the “enemies of socialism” are conniving and sneaky. When a new recruit protests this sleep deprivation used during interrogations as “inhumane” (*unmenschlich*), Wiesler marks an “x” on that recruit’s profile in his notes. This scene, though ultimately not consequential to the remaining plotline of the film, encases the cold, unforgiving role of state enforcer that Wiesler initially embodies.

The film is careful to not leave the viewer unfamiliar with the technical “how” of the way Stasi suspects were meticulously watched.

The systematic bugging [1] of



Figure 12: 00:19:35: The hand of the state violates Dreyman's locked door

Dreyman’s apartment provides a neat encapsulation of Stasi tactics. As in *Barbara*, living spaces—effectively state property—were not exempt from surveillance and



Figure 11: 00:20:11: An anonymous grey agent places bugs in Dreyman's walls

search. Digging through personal effects and the physical implantation of bugs into the apartment—placing wires behind

walls, breaking locks—is shown as being performed by anonymous, faceless figures clad in grey. The fast tempo and methodical planning exhibited by Wiesler and his subordinates during the bugging seems to capture the image of the Staatssicherheit as a cunning and secretive body. Unbeknownst to Dreyman, a team of Stasi workers had placed microphones in every room of the house and cameras around the apartment complex within a time window of less than twenty minutes.

Some smaller subplots in the film emphasize the extent of the Ministry's reach, such as the forced collusion of neighbors in investigations. While bugging



Figure 13: 00:21:57: Wiesler ominously threatens Dreyman's neighbor to not breathe a word of the situation to anyone

Dreyman's apartment, the ever-cunning Wiesler noticed—via a shadow in her door's peephole lens—that an inhabitant of the neighboring apartment, Frau Meineke (Marie Gruber), had been watching the Stasi

come and go. Wiesler pounds on the door, and ominously warns the woman when she hesitantly opens that Dreyman nor anyone else should not hear a single word of what she saw—lest her daughter lose her place at medical school that same day. Wiesler also informs her that he will have a gift sent to her apartment as a thanks for her compliance (an overhearing agent suggests a cactus)⁶. The state simultaneously strong-armed and threatened its subjects lives and livelihoods, like the warning against Meineke's daughter; but audaciously presented itself as a generous provider, even deigning to give the woman a gift. Later in the film, Christa-

⁶ „Frau Meineke, ein Wort zu irgendwem, und Ihre Mascha verliert morgen ihren Medizin-Studienplatz. Verstanden?“

Maria asks Dreyman to put on a tie for a party the two are hosting, but Dreyman does not know how to tie one, and is embarrassed to admit this. He darts into the next room to attempt to tie it, and hears his neighbor, Frau Meineke, coming up the stairwell and enlists her help. The woman is clearly under great distress interacting with Dreyman, her face visibly strained as she is simultaneously concerned for her own safety and sympathetic to Dreyman's plight. She looks at him nervously, clearly knowing that their conversation is being recorded. His words to her (made in jest) capture the situation's irony—"We can keep this a secret, right? Can you keep a secret?"⁷. She darts away, helpless as she is forced to ignore reality and subvert the truth.

Wiesler's hard façade portrayed early in the film begins to slowly crumble as he is shocked to learn of the systemic corruption in the Stasi. The first stirrings of uncertainty in Wiesler come when he discovers, via camera footage, Christa-Maria Sieland arriving home late at night. Hempf had effectively abducted her as she walked home alone, insisting she get into his limousine, demanding sexual favors and raping her when she refused.

The next day in the Stasi cantina, Wiesler confronts Grubitz about what he has learned about Hempf's ulterior motives for pursuing the case, and Grubitz essentially says that such things are simply the way things are done—they are serving the interests of the party, and what is the party if not its members? When the two first meet, Grubitz asks Wiesler why he does not choose to sit in the officer section, and Wiesler blithely replies: "Irgendwo muss der Sozialismus doch

⁷ —"Das bleibt aber unser Geheimnis, in Ordnung? Können Sie ein Geheimnis behalten?"

beginnen.” In this scene, Wiesler begins to realize that the state he serves pursues its own nefarious interests, not equality or progress.

Such a state built on mistrust, paranoia and conflict inevitably ate its



Figure 14: 00:36:19: An unfortunate agent has his career ruined over a single disrespectful joke

own, as both Wiesler and other agents previously in

good graces would find themselves facing the wrath of the surveillance state. Noteworthy in the same cantina scene is the debacle that occurs when an agent at a neighboring table is overheard making a joke about Honecker, the head of the SED and leader of the German Democratic Republic. Grubitz, overhearing him, interrupts the man, who is shocked and intensely nervous at having been overheard telling such a joke by a superior. Grubitz demands the man finish the joke, feigning to find it funny, and he obliges. In one of the closing scenes of the film, in which the demoted Wiesler sits in a cellar room opening letters with a steamer, the man who made the joke is seen as having been condemned to the same fate. Despite its many ironies, the socialist state was ultimately quite humorless.



Figure 1500:51:24: Hearing of Jerska's suicide, Wiesler's facade breaks down as he mourns along with his surveillance targets

Wiesler's defection is shown as nearing completion as he reads a copy of a Brecht work taken, rather symbolically, from Dreyman's apartment. Only minutes before, the agent had

had sex with a prostitute on the very couch on which he reads the book, some of the only intimate interaction had by Wiesler in the entire film.



Figure 16: 49:08: The previously robotic and reticent Wiesler is moved by a Brecht poem borrowed from Dreyman

In his dingy, drab apartment, the lonely Wiesler is shown as eager for this small outlet of human interaction with the prostitute, asking her to stay with him. Wiesler's apartment is clinically lit and drably decorated—a spatial representation of the cold, unfeeling communist system. The poem he reads from the Brecht book is an evocative love poem—*Erinnerung an Marie A.* Wiesler lays down on the couch, holding the book above his head and reading whimsically. This marks a distinct break from the cold, calculating Wiesler of the early film; an internal triumph of humanity over iron-fisted repression.

Soon afterward, Wiesler is shown back in the attic of Dreyman's apartment, sitting at his surveillance station. Dreyman receives a call—intercepted by Dreyman—that Jerska had hanged himself, distraught at being frozen out of publishing his work. Wiesler, the once stoic and stone-faced Stasi agent, is shocked, sitting in silence as he sheds a tear, listening (via headphone) to the *Sonate vom guten Menschen* being played by Dreyman's on the piano. The record was a gift to Dreyman by Jerksa, a fact of which Wiesler is, of course, aware; and its name—invoking the idea of what makes a “good person”—becomes particularly relevant when the former enabler of oppression, Wiesler, comes to shield his targets.

By endeavoring to write an article for *Der Spiegel* on the suicide problem and its cover-up in the DDR, Dreyman's sedition and disloyalty assumes new dimensions—but Wiesler, now fully disillusioned with his state and already deeply and irrevocably involved with his own ploy to protect Dreyman, continues his efforts. This metamorphosis reaches its peak when near the film's end when Wiesler, to protect Dreyman but also himself, races to Dreyman's apartment to remove the smuggled typewriter before the Stasi raid can uncover it. By sacrificing his career to protect a stranger, Wiesler personifies the ultimate triumph of humanity's free spirit over the toxic weight of oppression.

Conclusion

Donnersmarck's film is about history, but even more so, it is a film about humanity; about selfishness and power-lust, but also redemption, sympathy, and change of heart. The heartwarming tale told in *Das Leben der Anderen* will contrast radically with the third film of the analysis—*Zwei Leben*—a work that questions the limits of healing and the long shadow of tyranny and oppression.

Chapter 3: *Zwei Leben*

Summary and Introduction

The 2012 *Zwei Leben* (*Two Lives*) is a complex film, simultaneously a drama and a mystery espionage thriller. Codirected by Georg Maas and Judith Kaufmann, *Zwei Leben* is the third and final film of this analysis. Detailing the chaos and strife faced by those in the communist intelligentsia immediately upon the end of the Cold War, the film embodies the sense of shock, trauma, and betrayal that rocked those in former East Germany following the final, once-unthinkable collapse of socialism. Like *Das Leben der Anderen*, *Zwei Leben* interrogates the intersection of the state's spying apparatus and state actors who came to sympathize with and care for their targets—but unlike *Das Leben der Anderen*, this film is not a story of redemption and renewal in the face of adversity—but rather, how the suffocating oppression could irreparably destroy its victims.

Set in 1989 and 1990 (with brief segments in the 1960s), the story follows Vera (Juliane Köhler and Klara Manzel), a Stasi agent who assumed the name Katrine Evensen and immigrated to Norway in 1969 to conduct espionage for East Germany, under the guises of being a Lebensborn child—the daughter of an SS soldier and a Norwegian woman who had been separated from her mother (Liv Ullmann) and sent to Germany after the war. Initially loyal to the *Staatssicherheit*, she comes to view her “adopted” mother as family, and Vera eventually falls in love with and marries a Norwegian naval captain, Bjarte (Sven Nordin and Thorbjørn Harr), having a daughter (Julia Bache-Wiig) and grandchild of her own by the film's opening in 1990. Once a zealous and eager agent, she comes to be disillusioned, far

more loyal to her second, adopted life than to the East German state. With the fall of the eastern bloc, a team of lawyers, including the idealistic West German Sven (Ken Duken), hopes to compensate the Lebensborn children for the injustices they faced, suing the German and Norwegian states for reparations. The lawyers begin to investigate each of the Lebensborn children's background stories—to Vera's great distress, as she fears being uncovered as a fraud. Despite the fall of the socialist regime, her former Stasi commander Hugo (Rainer Bock) continues to threaten Vera, demanding her assistance in suppressing the investigation into the Lebensborn and intimidating her out of fear that she may reveal his own double life.

It is ultimately revealed that Vera had been an orphan in East Germany, recruited by the Stasi after the state vis-à-vis Hugo gave her the semblance of love and belonging—only to coerce her into doing its bidding even after she had second thoughts. Toward the end of the film, Vera's Stasi overseers inform her that she is to lie to Bjarte and tell him that she is leaving him for another man, and board a flight to still-communist Cuba to ensure her complicity. In that same night, Sven delivers Vera's family a video he had discovered of the true Katrine Evensen, a real woman who had escaped from East Germany to Denmark, talking on camera to a news reporter about her story. Vera, at the end of her rope, finally reveals the truth to her bewildered and horrified family: that she had been an East German spy and an imposter for the last 20 years. Vera leaves to meet Hugo at an airport to ostensibly fly to Cuba, but turns around on the jetway at the last moment and returns to her family, saying she will turn herself in. Vera reveals to her adopted mother that the real Katrine Evensen had indeed come to Norway to find her family. Vera

anticipated her arrival, greeting the real Katrine Evensen at the door of her mother's house. Despite having initially planned to betray the girl and return her to East Germany, Vera grew sympathetic and decided to help her flee, only for Hugo to arrive in the moment they were both planning to leave, killing Katrine in the ensuing chase and burning her body in the forest. After revealing this dark secret to her astonished adopted mother, Vera drives to turn herself in to the police, but her brake lines had been cut. The closing segment shows her car crashing into a seaside boulder, catching fire as the camera fades to darkness.

Stylistic, Thematic, and Character Analysis

Like *Barbara* and *Das Leben der Anderen*, Georg Maas and Juliane Kaufmann's *Zwei Leben* (2012) is a film about the trauma of oppression and state violence—but unlike its peers, *Zwei Leben* examines state crimes after-the-fact, as a historical matter; and as such most of the film's runtime does not portray the present, day-to-day experience of tyranny and oppression in East Germany itself, as the other two films do. A work filled simultaneously with sorrow, angst, shock, duplicity, and uncertainty, Maas and Kaufmann delve into the unfinished work of remembering the scars left by the tyranny of the Iron Curtain in the post-Wende period. The film's ghostly, otherworldly, and anxious mood underlie the faceless, forgotten victims of the iron-fisted eastern bloc and the Stasi state, whose story the directors aim to capture. Departing from the themes of perseverance and redemption, *Zwei Leben* explores the darker side of the story of life after the euphoria of the Wende: how the perpetrators (and perpetration) of state violence are dealt with after the wall came down—and how victims are (not) made whole.

More concretely, *Zwei Leben* is a film about the aftershock of two separate but intimately connected dark episodes of German (and broader European) history: the viciousness visited upon Norway by the Nazis, and the ensuing exploitation of that legacy by East Germany and the *Staatssicherheit*. The film wastes no time in establishing its historic task and mood, with its opening segment ushering in the nervous yet euphoric historical shock of the final death of Soviet communism in Eastern Europe, featuring a black screen showing only the monumental date—the day of the dissolution of the East German state, and the formal reunification of Germany. The muffled, excited reports of radio hosts, in multiple languages, break the news of the final downfall of communism in the background; clearly world-shattering change is afoot. *Zwei Leben* is a deeply historical film, borne of detailed real-world research into the machinations of the *Staatssicherheit* in Norway—but on an even deeper level, the film embodies the dilemma faced by many in former East Germany: Can certain wrongs ever be truly righted? How can one—or an entire society—move on from a troubling and unjust past? Can those who commit egregious crimes ever be forgiven, even when the perpetrators are those closest to you? Maas and Kaufmann muddy the positive and humanistic ethos of Petzold and especially of von Donnersmarck. The personal redemption of Wiesler and the resolute defiance of Barbara do not, unfortunately, tell the whole story: The post-reunification cinema art depicting the former East Germany, and its reverberations through time and place, deals not only with triumph and resilience, but also with insurmountable tragedy and irresolvable pain.

Certainly, as in the two other films examined, complicity in state repression is a central feature of the film's plot; such is unsurprising in a film about an undercover Stasi agent working abroad—but rather than focus the historical legacy of German communism on redemption, resistance, and healing, Maas and Kaufmann frame the downfall of the regime around culpability; exploring what it was that enticed people to commit crimes for the state, the consequences of such acts, and what could happen if perpetrators had second thoughts. The tragic situation the film portrays was the result of a long string of cruel injustices, beginning with the Nazi invasion of Norway and continuing into the Cold War; and the two center their narrative on those who were left behind or forgotten by history: the women who were shunned for loving German soldiers, and those unknown and unknowable persons who perished fleeing the east. Any traumatic historical episode has long-lasting aftereffects, but the peculiarities of the East German surveillance state—its geographic scope, size, tactics—distinguish it as in many ways unique in its forms of repression. The cruelty of the SED dictatorship seen in the film lasted not only during its reign, but lived on in its reverberations in the lives of the people it damaged—a lingering German cultural and societal thread seen to this day.

Zwei Leben, then, is a project examining the limits of personal, societal and historical healing and reconciliation; embodying the shock, disappointment, and betrayal experienced after the full scope of the Stasi state became known. Its thrilling yet emotionally evocative and volatile unfolding is an encapsulation of the chaotic mix of emotions collectively underwent by millions upon the final downfall of East Germany. It captures the story of faceless, anonymous victims; dissects the

psychology of state perpetrators and the effects their crimes could have on both their victims and loved ones, and further reveals the true scope and dimension of the Democratic Republic's long, repressive reach.

Archetypal characters drive the film's plotline, helping it fulfill its task of narrating history. Katrine Evensen was the embodiment of the tragically exploited and erased victim of state cruelty. Hugo was the ruthless, cunning personification of the state and its machinations; Vera's family is the parallel to the countless Germans who were shocked to learn of their loved ones' complicity in tyranny. Sven is the naïve optimist, believing that a formal trial can somehow "make whole" those destroyed by the regime. Vera herself is the most complex character of the film—embodying at different points a conniving and idealist spy, and later a seemingly regular woman who regretted her role in the murder of Katrine.

Unlike the unattached Barbara and Wiesler, Vera leaves behind a perplexed family, shocked at the truth of her role as a spy. Like the loner "Barbara Wolf", whose name derives from symbolism, "Vera" stems from the Latin *veritas*, or "truth", redoubling the irony of her whole existence being a fabrication and elaborate lie. Vera's relationship with her husband, adopted mother, and progeny comes to represent the pain felt by countless Germans who learned of their loved ones' complicity in state crimes. Even after the dissolution of the SED regime, Vera—her name derived from truth—could not escape the reality of her actions, just as viewers and German society could not simply forget the reality of a painful past.

Perhaps most biting of these allegorical characterizations is that of Katrine. The co-opting of Katrine Evensen's identity for state purposes represents a tragic

reality: that victims of state violence are often—perhaps even almost always—forgotten; or perhaps more accurately, any memory of them is deliberately erased. As embodied by the real Katrine Evensen and also by Vera, Maas and Kaufmann remind viewers that resistance to tyranny, however noble, is not always yielded victory by history. The collision of biography and broader history, so painfully experienced by the Germans of the 20th century, is a central element of Maas and Kaufmann's work, as the Cold War and *Wende* have immense implications for Vera and those around her.

Having portrayed the cruelties of the *Staatssicherheit*, Maas and Kaufman go on to explore the fact that it is often impossible to truly heal certain historical wounds; or that such healing can take generations. This facet is literally personified in the case of Vera and the crusade for justice for the Lebensborn via the legal case to achieve reparations from the state—an ultimately feckless endeavor, as the facts of the case are forever obscured, and the real Katrine Evensen had been murdered decades earlier. The cruel irony that Vera was an accomplice in the murder of the same woman, Katrine, who is ostensibly being represented in court in order to secure restitution for state crimes could scarcely better capture this strand of the film's ethos and irony.

The experience of Vera's family, blissfully unaware of her actions for most of the film, coincides with the sense of shock and betrayal felt by broader East German society in the 1990s and onward, as the perfidy of the old regime was revealed: Indeed, thousands of East Germans were horrified to discover some of their closest friends and family had secretly worked for the Stasi as *IMs*. The film's recent 2012

release emphasizes the still-healing wounds of shock and denial underlying the legacy of former East Germany.

More than any other singular figure in the three films of this analysis, the Stasi man Hugo embodies both the utopian dream of community and triumph postured by 20th century socialism, and its harsher true colors and methods. He is shown adopting an almost father-like role over Vera's younger self, assuring her of what an honor it was to be selected for foreign operations, and promising her the belonging she craved—much as the broader socialist state promised comradeship and plenty, but delivered only hypocrisy and



Figure 17: 00:23:50–51: An exuberant Hugo welcomes a young Vera into the fold

heavy-handed authority. After seducing Vera into enlisting with promises of camaraderie, belonging, and happiness, he begins to abuse and manipulate her as an underling to do his bidding—under threat of blackmail and violence. Once the Norwegian police began investigating the circumstances behind the (unidentified) corpse of Katrine Evensen, he blackmails her by threatening to reveal the truth should she renege. Hugo's promises of familial belonging, like the ideal society put forward by socialist dogma, was a chimera; abused by Hugo to manipulate Vera achieve his goals. Hugo is not portrayed, however, as a reflexive monster; his is a conscious actor with some degree of feelings and self-determination. *Zwei Leben* emphasizes, like *Das Leben der Anderen*, that the enforcers state repression were not

an amorphous blob or faceless monolith, but a collective of real people; individuals who made decisions both in line with the demands of authority and according to their own (sometimes nefarious) ends.

While *Barbara* simply takes the existence of hardened state ideologues as a given; and *Das Leben der Anderen* does not explore what first molded Wiesler into a Stasi man, *Zwei Leben* intimately relays the events and background of Vera's life that led her to become a willing agent for the regime. The film repeatedly features flashbacks to Vera's initial training and early life as an agent; being praised by Hugo and reassured of what an honor her service was as she undertook exciting missions like photographing Norwegian military schemata.

Cinematographically, Maas and Kaufmann intersperse multiple grainy flashbacks throughout the picture, emphasizing the intimate link between past and present. The film's exhilarating, suspenseful tempo dovetails nicely with the intense uncertainty and anxiety the viewer feels toward Vera and her predicament. Like the family of Vera, the viewer is often left bewildered and unsure of goings-on in the plot—only to be enlightened to the truth piece by piece as the work progresses.

Scene Analysis

Whereas much of the film portrays the pleasant, comfortable life that Katrine had built in Norway under the auspices of having fled East Germany, this idyll is



Figure 18: 01:27:50: The anonymous woman frantically fleeing an unseen threat, revealed to be the true Katrine Evensen.

interrupted repeatedly by uncomfortable flashbacks to the past: grainy, angst-filled glimpses into the shocking

background of the tentacular Stasi apparatus. Several times throughout the film, Katrine experiences a recurring, nightmarish vision—a brief, gritty, black-and-white cutaway clip of a woman running frantically through the forest. The footage is blurred and shadowy; drowned screams fill the background as she pants and flees from an unknown assailant. Her black outline literally makes her the embodiment of the faceless victim of the regime. The viewer does not initially know that the woman is the murdered Katrine Evensen—but infers that a dark past underlies Vera’s cozy existence. As the woman rounds a corner, panting from exertion, she strikes an unseen figure—another woman, who resembles Vera—in the face with a branch, and she crumples to the ground.



Figure 19: 01:26:50–53: Katrine refuses to go quietly

It is revealed in the concluding scenes of the film that the woman in the segment clip was the true Katrine Evensen; the second life of the film’s namesake. Importantly, Katrine is not some hapless victim. She offers some serious resistance to Hugo’s attempt to arrest her, true to her archetype of a free-spirited soul trying to flee tyranny. Her strong will for freedom, coupled with her innocence and seeming good-heartedness, makes her case all the more tragic. As Hugo escorts her out of her mother’s house in an attempt to arrest her, she grabs a butcher knife lying on a counter, driving it into his

stomach before sprinting out of the house and into the woods.

The dreams of the young Katrine for family and freedom, like so many other protagonists in the history and film of East German dissidence, were snuffed out by the state monolith. The real Katrine Evensen had found her way to her mother's house of her own accord, where Vera met her; only to be apprehended and murdered by the state she had fled.

Like Wiesler, the once zealous Vera retains some of her humanity, coming to realize the wrong of turning Katrine over to Hugo and his partner. Despite her past, Vera remains a sympathetic character; trapped by a lie she helped to spin.



Figure 20: 01:27:03: Vera slams the door behind Katrine in a bid to buy her time to flee from the pursuing Stasi, but it is too late

At the film's end, the fate befallen by both women instructs the viewer how the tyranny of the East German regime could consume both perpetrators who had

second thoughts and targets alike.

At the end of the film, the true scope of its crimes are revealed to the viewer through the untold story of the real Katrine Evensen; just as the extent of the East German state's crimes became



Figure 21: 01:29:04: Katrine's body is unceremoniously burned in the woods, her fate unknown for decades

evident to the world upon its demise. Both women ultimately wanted only belonging and to be able to mold their own lives—but both of their two lives were destroyed by the encroaching dictatorship of the Democratic Republic.

Retrospectively, once the viewer understands the full story of Katrine Evensen, the case of the Lebensborn trials becomes all the more ironic and tragic. As the case against Norway and West Germany for their handling of the aftermath of the Lebensborn situation moves forward, the scene of Katrine in the courtroom captures both her personal predicament and the grinding injustice of the inability to right the injustices perpetrated by the state. As the imposter Vera stumbles through her cross-examining, unable to give meaningful or detailed answers about her alibi,



Figure 22: 00:55:15: Having escaped the East for the moment, the true Katrine must undergo still further assault and degradation.

the film cuts to several grainy flashback segments of the true Katrine during and after her escape—in one, she is sitting alone in an office with a West German border official, who promises her protection, but implies she must “offer him something”, and proceeds to sexually

assault her. It is revealed that the true Katrine Evensen had filed a complaint about the incident to the Danish authorities. As it regards the Lebensborn children and some eastern escapees, Maas and Kaufmann certainly want to at least reference that the West is hardly innocent in its own mistreatment of victims of repression; further emphasizing how past injustice and violence engenders new cycles of oppression. When pressed about this incident by Sven, the Katrine can only claim that she “cannot remember”—the memory of the event is, factually, gone forever.

As Sven cross-examines Vera—in disbelief that she cannot remember an event so traumatic and thoroughly described in the report, Vera’s (and the camera’s



Figure 23: 01:23:24: The final scene before camera fades to black: a second life claimed by the Stasi state

view fixes on a disguised Hugo, who is in attendance at the trial. In this moment, Sven embodies the idealism of 1990; the euphoric historical moment after the wall fell where it seemed the injustices of the past could simply be swept away. By silently threatening Vera with his presence, the courtroom becomes a symbol both for the long shadow of the East German state, and the tragedy of some of its victims being forever forgotten.

Vera’s ultimate fate—physical destruction, disappearing unexpectedly without a full explanation or resolution—leaves her family bitterly angry and with their shock and confusion



Figure 24: 01:08:50: Vera's shocked family learns the sordid truth

unresolved, in a way not dissimilar to the disillusioned and sometimes hostile mood experienced in the East after the initial euphoria of reunification wore off.

Conclusion

Qualifying the forward-looking and humanistic undertones of *Das Leben der Anderen* and *Barbara*, *Zwei Leben* reminds that the painful saga left in the aftermath of communist repression is not over; and many of the victims of state tyranny

cannot be made whole. Maas and Kaufmann draw attention to the unfinished work of history, giving space to faceless victims forgotten by time, and completing the image of every echelon of the regime, from its perpetrators and accomplices to its victims. The two directors also offer a fuller emotional palette of the topic of repression in former East Germany—reminding that shock, anger, and sorrow are inevitably as much a part of its legacy as perseverance and triumph over evil.

Conclusion

Zwei Leben is a fitting choice as the final film for analysis, reminding that the legacy of reunification and the end of East Germany is in many ways far from over. The wounds of the past will take generations to heal—and it is not certain how to heal them. Reverberations of the old regime have continued far after its demise.

As time passes, the cultural memory of the trauma of repression under communism will continue to evolve, becoming increasingly second-hand and constructed, rather than remembered through personal experience. With additional historical perspective, how will the four-decade reign of the Democratic Republic be integrated into the broader German understanding of 20th century tyranny—as an aberration, or a continuation of earlier authoritarianism and oppression? How will the legacy of the East affect the modern Germany on issues of surveillance and state secrecy? Will state repression and political authoritarianism continue to dominate perceptions of the GDR more than its other features? No clear answer to these issues exists—this will be revealed only with time.

In the two and a half decades since the fall of the Iron Curtain, an image and understanding of the old regime has begun to solidify—but how this conception will change with time remains to be seen. Key, overarching themes unite and tie together the cinema of the Stasi state examined here, revealing the most important and prominent elements of the old GDR in the German popular imagination. The efforts of individuals to cope with, resist, and persevere through the state's attempts to subjugate them feature centrally in all films examined here: Barbara's ability to find a sense of duty and fulfillment in helping other victims of the regime as a doctor;

Dreyman's decision to pen his exposé for his friend Jerska; Katrine Evensen's ill-fated attempt to flee to freedom. These actions were imbued in the film with a certain nobleness; as a testament that there will always be brave people who stand up to injustice. In the story of life under the old regime, the lives of those who worked to undermine it have been centered by directors.

Inevitably, complicity and culpability were also a major element of the films' plotlines, underscoring that tyranny and oppression did not "just happen"; real, living human beings created and enforced it—André's work with Schütz; Christa-Maria's betrayal of Dreyman; Frau Meineke's coerced silence; Vera's entire second life. Within the broader project of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*, assigning guilt and ensuring accountability for the actions of the SED state remains a painful but important part of remembering the former East Germany, and the dramatic portrayal of state violence and those who commit it helps viewers understand how real people could commit such injustices. Linked with the memory of Nazi tyranny, film helps the 21st century Germany understand the motivations and psychologies of the perpetrators of the SED regime, giving the past human form and dimensions.

The cinema art about the former East Germany not only has historical value—in portraying the crimes of the Stasi state to new generations of modern viewers; but a humanistic value as well; as art is a crucial tool to cope with and memorialize tragedy. Moving forward, film and cinema will be indispensable to Germans' cultural understanding of the former Democratic Republic, as the reunified Germany moves forward in the new century after the wall.

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